Aspect in English and Mugali Rai: A Contrastive Study

Ichchha Purna Rai[1]

timma.rai@gmail.com

[1]Dhankuta Multiple Campus, Dhankuta, Tribhuvan University, Nepal

Abstract

The paper attempts to explore the aspect system in Mugali Rai, spoken in Dhankuta district of Nepal by a very few people and compares and contrasts Mugali Rai aspect system with that of English aspect system. There are only two aspects in Mugali Rai, namely, perfect and progressive. Perfect aspect can be categorised into past perfect and present perfect in terms of time dimensions. Similarly, progressive aspect is also categorised into past progressive and present progressive from time dimensions. All types of aspects in Mugali Rai are morphologically marked. On the contrary, aspect system in English is not only morphologically marked. There are several complex constructions using have+past participle, be+present participle, and have+been+present participle for perfect, progressive and perfect progressive, respectively. Mugali Rai has only four structures for aspect whereas English has 17 different types of aspectual structures described in examples (24-40). It is really a challenging job for Mugali Rai learners to conceptualise these different structures. Finally, this paper finds out EFL problems and suggests some pedagogical strategies for teaching and learning English aspect system as a foreign language to Mugali Rai learners.

Keywords: aspect, past progressive, present progressive, past perfect, present perfect

1. Introduction

Aspect is certainly different from tense though they are interrelated. There are mainly two types of aspect, namely, grammatical aspect and lexical aspect. In grammatical aspect, aspect is manifested through grammatical operations whereas lexical aspect refers to semantic properties of verbs whether or not an action is characterized by duration, an endpoint, or change (Cowan, 2009, p. 352). In this paper, grammatical aspect is described. Aspect expresses how a speaker views the action of the verb. An action, that is seen as bounded and complete, is perfect in aspect. If the action is seen as incomplete, it is imperfect in aspect; if seen as repeated, it is iterative; if seen as occurring regularly, it is habitual (Cowan, 2009, p. 251). In another definition, aspect describes the temporal shape of events or states (Payne, 2003, p. 238). Aspect is categorised into two types, namely, grammatical and lexical aspect. In grammatical aspect, aspect is manifested through grammatical operations, whereas lexical aspect refers to semantic properties of verbs whether or not an action is characterized by duration, an endpoint, or change (Cowan, 2009, p. 352). Similarly, aspect is defined through three dimensions, viz. perfectivity, which is categorised into two binary concepts such as perfective vs. imperfective, sequentiality, which is categorised into perfective vs. perfect, and immediacy, which is categorized into remote vs. vivid (Givon, 2001, p. 287).

1.1. Research Questions

There are a number of research issues about aspect in English and Mugali. This study mainly focuses on the following research questions.

a) Is there perfective or perfect aspect in English and Mugali?
b) How is aspect constructed in English and Mugali?
c) What are the similarities and differences between English and Mugali aspect?

d) What are the pedagogical implications?

1.2. Objectives of the Study

This study has the following objectives:

a) to analyze the aspectual construction in English and Mugali Rai
b) to contrast between English and Mugali Rai aspect
c) to point out pedagogical implications

1.3. Significance of the Study

This study is limited to contrastive study between English and Mugali aspect. It mainly analyses aspect system in both languages. It focuses on analysing Mugali aspect to compare and contrast it with English. It would be significant for those who wish to study endangered languages of Nepal and compare and contrast these languages from pedagogical perspective. It would also be significant for those who have been teaching English as a foreign language across the world.

1.4. Methods of the study

This study is based on descriptive linguistic approach, specifically on Contrastive Analysis (James, 1980; Lado, 1957). Contrastive analysis between two languages is based on some previous works (Rai, 2007, 2012). In the case of sources of data, English data were taken from the secondary sources which include Givon (2001), Payne (2003), and Cowan (2009). On the contrary, Mugali Rai is undocumented and undescribed language. For the first time, I visited the field (Muga VDC of Dhankuta, East Nepal) and described it in my first fieldwork (Rai, 2011).
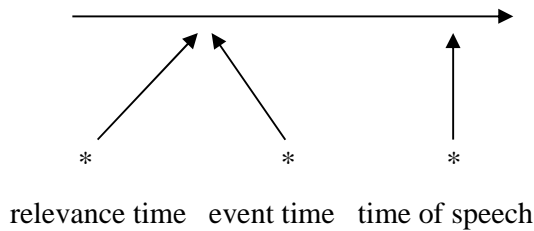
2. Analysis of English and Mugali Aspect

In this study, aspect in English and Mugali is described. There are different types of aspects expressed through the inflections in the verb such as perfect and perfective aspect which express the completeness of an action, imperfect aspect and progressive which express an ongoing activity or process, iterative aspect which expresses repetitiveness of an action, inceptive aspect which signals the beginning of an action, habitual aspect which expresses the action occurring regularly, inchoative aspect which signals entrance into a state, and lexical aspect.
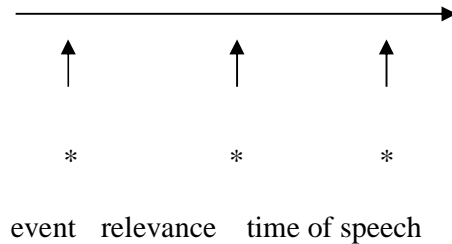
2.1. English Aspect

In English, they are represented by a number of ways. There are some puzzling concepts in different types of aspects. So, it is important to define some concepts of aspect found in the English language. In many traditional grammar books of English, perfect and perfective are treated as one and the same, but this is not the case. There are considerable differences between perfect aspect and perfective aspect, which can be presented through the following figure adapted from Givon (2001, p. 296). This figure can help distinguish perfective from perfect aspect more clearly.

a. Perfective Past

relevance time   event time   time of speech

b. Perfect Past

event   relevance   time of speech

Perfective refers to a situation which is seen as a whole, regardless of the time contrasts which may be a part of it. On the contrary, the perfect refers to a past situation where the event is seen as having some present relevance (Crystal, 2008, p. 356). Givon (2001, p. 296) has given the following examples to make the difference between past perfective and past perfect.

(1) He came in and ate rice (past perfective).

(2) He came in. He had (already) eaten rice (past perfect).

The difference between perfective and perfect may also be defined as the in-sequence and out-of-sequence. In (1), there is in-sequence between two clauses which expresses the perfective aspect, whereas in (2), there is out-of-sequence between two clauses which expresses the perfect aspect. If we look at these two examples mentioned in (1) and (2), there is no perfective aspect in English. In English, the aspectual meaning of perfective aspect is expressed by past tense. So, there is only perfect aspect but not perfective aspect in English.

In English, there are only two aspects, viz. perfect aspect and progressive aspect, which are represented in verbs. Two aspects are expressed through auxiliary verbs and the form of main verbs. The progressive aspect which represents an ongoing action is structured with *be+present participle (-ing)* and the perfect aspect which represents action that is complete is constructed with *have+past participle (-ed/-en)*. These two forms of aspect express the aspectual meanings in English. The progressive and perfect aspects are combined to form perfect progressive aspect in English. All of these aspects are combined with the three dimensions of times, viz. past, present, and future. They can be illustrated by the following examples.

(3) He is working (progressive aspect expressing present time).

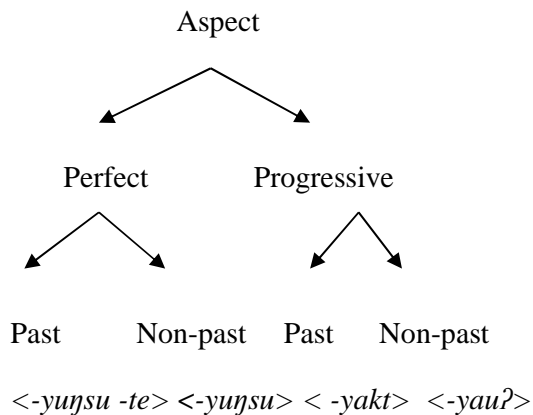(4) He was working (progressive aspect expressing past time).

(5) He will be working (progressive aspect expressing future time).

(6) He has worked/he has broken a cup (perfect aspect expressing present time).

(7) He had worked/he had broken a cup (perfect aspect expressing past time).

(8) He will have worked/he will have broken a cup (perfect aspect expressing future time).

(9) He has been working (perfect progressive aspect expressing present time).

(10) He had been working (perfect progressive aspect expressing past time).

(11) He will have been working (perfect progressive aspect expressing future time).

In English, there are nine subtypes of aspect which play an important role in English grammar and are sometimes more problematic for EFL students.

2.2. Mugali Rai Aspect

Mugali Rai [lmh] is one of the Kirati languages spoken in the small village of Dhankuta District, East Nepal. It is an SOV language with postposition, no gender, verbal affixation markers for person, number, tense, and aspect (Eppele, 2012, p. 60), but it has not been recorded by the latest census report (2011). So, it is on the verge of extinction.

In Mugali Rai, there are two types of aspect, perfect and progressive. Both of these can be categorised into two subtypes on the basis of time dimensions, viz. past and present only. There is no grammatical marker referring to future in Mugali Rai, as described below (Rai, 2012, p. 61-69; Rai, 2015, p. 92-95).

```
                        Aspect
                       /      \
                      /        \
                  Perfect    Progressive
                  /    \       /     \
                 /      \     /       \
              Past   Non-past  Past  Non-past
```

<-yuŋsu -te> <-yuŋsu>   < -yakt>   <-yauʔ>

2.2.1. *Perfect aspect*

Perfect aspect can be categorised into two types on the basis of time dimension, which are past perfect and present perfect.

2.2.1.1. *Past perfect*

In Mugali Rai, the past perfect is constructed through a complex structure. For past perfect, the present perfect marker *<-yuŋsu>,* and past marker *<-ŋe/yẽ>* and another marker *<-te>* are suffixed to the verb stem gradually. It can be shown in the following examples.

(12)   *kaŋa cama thukyuŋsuyẽte*

ka-ŋa cama thuk-yuŋsu-yẽ-*te*
1SGA/S-ERG rice cook-PERF-PST-PERF
I had cooked rice.

(13)   *ka imyuŋsuyẽte*
ka im-yuŋsu-yẽ-te
1SGA/S sleep-PERF-PST-PERF
I had slept.

2.2.1.2. Present perfect

Similarly, the present perfect aspect is expressed by *<-yuŋsu>* morpheme which is suffixed to the verb stem. The morpheme *<-yuŋsu>* is immediately followed by the past tense marker *<-yẽ)>*. It can be illustrated by the following examples.

(14)   *kaŋa cama thukyuŋsuyẽ*
ka-ŋa cama thuk-yuŋsu-yẽ
1SGA/S-ERG rice cook-PERF-PST
I have cooked rice.

(15)   *ka imyuŋsuyẽ*
ka im-yuŋsu-yẽ
1SGA/S sleep-PERF-PST
I have slept.

2.2.2. Progressive aspect

Progressive aspect refers to an ongoing action of verb in Mugali Rai which can be categorised into two types on the basis of time dimension, i.e. past progressive aspect and present progressive aspect, as described below.

2.2.2.1. Past progressive aspect

In Mugali Rai, the morpheme *<-yakt>* refers to past progressive aspect which attaches to the verb stem immediately, and it is followed by tense and other markers. It is illustrated with the following examples.

(16)   *ka cama thukyaktayẽ*
ka cama thuk-yakt-yẽ
1SGA/S rice cook-PROG-PST
I was cooking rice.

(17)   *ka imyaktaye)*
ka im-yakt-ye)
1SGA/S sleep-PROG-PST
I was sleeping.

2.2.2.2. Present progressive aspect

In Mugali Rai, the suffix *<-yauʔ>*, which immediately follows a verb, represents the present progressive aspect. The following examples make them clear.

(18)   *ka cama thukyau?ŋa*
        ka cama thuk-yau?-ŋa
        1SGA/S rice cook-PROG-1SNPST
        I am cooking rice.

(19)   *ka imyau?ŋa*
        ka im-yau?-ŋa
        1SGGA/S sleep-PROG-1SGNPST
        I am sleeping.

3. A Contrastive Analysis and Acquisitional Problems

English and Mugali Rai are completely different languages. English as an SVO language is a member of the Germanic group of Proto-Indo-European language family (Yule, 1993, p. 168), whereas Mugali Rai as an SOV language is a member of Eastern Kiranti of Tibeto Burman language family (Winter, 1991, p. 110). These two languages are completely different from each other from the perspective of language family. So, the construction of the aspect in both languages is different. If there are differences between them, there would be some acquisitonal problems that Mugali Rai as EFL learners face. The major contrasts in constructing aspect between the two languages are as follows.

In the Mugali Rai language, many things such as tense, aspect, person, number, agent, and patient markers are inflected in a single verb, which is a basic feature of the Tibeto-Burman langauges. Such features are found in pronominalized languages. It is also known as a *polysynthetic* langauge (Crystal, 2008, p. 374). Example (20) shows the construction of past perfect in Mugali. Example (21) shows the construction of present perfect in Mugali. Example (22) shows the construction of past progressive in Mugali. Example (23) shows the construction of present progressive in Mugali. There is no future aspect in Mugali Rai like English. Similarly, there is no construction of perfect progressive combination in Mugali Rai, which is found in English. The following examples make them clear.

(20)   *kaŋa cama thukyuŋsuyẽte*
        ka-ŋa cama thuk-yuŋsu-yẽ-*te*
        1SGA/S-ERG rice cook-PERF-PST-PERF
        I had cooked rice.

(21)   *kaŋa cama thukyuŋsuyẽ*
         ka-ŋa cama thuk-yuŋsu-yẽ
        1SGA/S-ERG rice cook-PERF-PST
        I have cooked rice.

(22)   *ka cama thukyaktayẽ*
        ka cama thuk-yakt-yẽ
        1SGA/S rice cook-PROG-PST
        I was cooking rice.

(23)   *ka cama thukyau?ŋa*
        ka cama thuk-yau?-ŋa
        1SGA/S rice cook-PROG-1SNPST

I am cooking rice.

In Mugali Rai, markers for all types of aspect follow a stem. The stem *thuk-* is followed by morphemes *<-yuŋsu-PST-te>* for past perfect, by *<-yuŋsu>* for present perfect, by *<-yakt>* for past progressive, and by *<-yauʔ>* for present progressive. In this way, there are only two aspects in Mugali Rai, namely, perfect and progressive. Both perfect and progressive can be categorised into present and past in terms of time dimension. All these aspects in Mugali Rai are morphologically marked.

On the contrary, aspect is not only morphologically marked in English. There are complex constructions for aspect in English. There are three types of aspect, namely, perfect, progressive, and perfect progressive aspect. In English, aspect is constructed through the combination of the auxiliary verb and the forms of the main verb. The structure of aspect in English is more complex in comparison with the structure of Mugali Rai aspect. In English, perfect aspect is constructed through *'have+past participle'*. But there are three types of perfect in terms of time dimensions, which are past perfect, present perfect, and future perfect. Past perfect is constructed through *'had+past participle'*, present perfect is constructed through *'have/has+past participle'*, and future perfect is constructed through *'shall/will have+past participle'*. Similarly, progressive is constructed through *'be+present participle'*. Progressive aspect is also categorised into three types in terms of time dimensions: past progressive, present progressive, and future progressive. Past progressive is constructed through *'was/were+present participle'*, present progressive through *'am/is/are+present participle'*, and future progressevie is constructed through *'shall/will be+present participle'*. Example (24) refers to past perfect, the examples (25-26) refer to present perfect, and the examples (27-28) refer to future perfect. Similarly, the examples (29-30) refer to past progressive, the examples (31-33) refer to present progressive, and the examples (34-35) refer to future progressive. Similarly, Example (36) refers to past perfect progressive, examples (37-38) refer to present perfect progressive, and examples (39-40) refer to future perfect progressive. The following examples make it clear.

(24) I/we/you/he/she/(it)/they had cooked rice.

(25) I/we/you/they have cooked rice.

(26) He/she/(it) has cooked rice.

(27) I/we shall have cooked rice.

(28) You/he/she/(it)/they will have cooked rice.

(29) I/he/she/(it) was cooking rice.

(30) We/you/they were cooking rice.

(31) I am cooking rice.

(32) We/you/they are cooking rice.

(33) He/she/(it) is cooking rice.

(34) I/we shall be cooking rice.

(35) You/he/she/(it)/they will be cooking rice.

(36) I/we/you/he/she/(it)/they had been cooking rice.

(37) I/we/you/they have been cooking rice.

(38) He/she/(it) has been cooking rice.

(39) I/we shall have been cooking rice.

(40) You/he/she/(it) will have been cooking rice.

In this way, English aspect is more complicated in comparison with aspect in Mugali Rai. Example (24) is not so problematic for Mugali Rai because its equivalent is found in Mugali Rai. It is assumed that structural differences are the source of difficulty in foreign language learning. Lado (1957) viewed learning diffculty and differences as being directly and proportionally related. Of the L2 learner he wrote: "Those elements that are similar to his native language will be simple for him and those elements that are different will be difficult" (as cited in James, 1980, p. 188). So, structural differences between two languages play an important role in learning a foreign language. Structural differences can be found in many examples in English which are not found in Mugali Rai. For instance, the sentences found in examples (25-26) are problematic since there are two auxiliary verbs *have* and *has* which are selected on the basis of subject. Both sentences are realized by a single sentence in Mugali Rai. So, Mugali Rai as EFL learners confuse the auxiliary verbs *has* and *have*.

Similarly, the sentences found in examples (27-28) are not found in Mugali Rai. There is no separate structural form to express future perfect in Mugali Rai. So, there is acquisitional problem for Mugali Rai as EFL learners.

The sentences found in examples (29-30) are also problematic for Mugali Rai as EFL learners. They cannot use *was* and *were* appropriately. The sentences found in examples (31-33) are also problematic in the sense that Mugali Rai as EFL learners cannot use *am/is/are/* appropriately.

There is no future progressive in Mugali Rai. So, the sentences found in examples (34-35) are also problematic for them. Mugali Rai learners cannot use *shall* and *will* appropriately.

The sentences found in examples (36-40) are also problematic because there is no combination of both perfect and progressive aspect in the Mugali Rai language.

In conclusion, there are only four structures to express aspect in Mugali Rai, which include past perfect, present perfect, past progressive and present progressive. On the contrary, English has 17 different structures to express aspect. They have been described in examples from 24 to 40. There are considerable structural differences between English and Mugali Rai aspect.

4. Conclusions

There are considerable differences between English and Mugali Rai aspect. So, it is assumed that Mugali Rai learners find English aspect difficult to use appropriately. They can

commit errors in the use of English aspect. So, language teachers should pay a special attention to those areas where there are structural differences between these two languages.

For addressing grammatical errors, Cowan (2009, pp. 45-46) provides extensively detailed guidelines. The question is what we should do about the grammatical errors made by students. To answer the question, we must look at the development of interlanguage. Interlangauge (IL) refers to the language system that evolves as a learner studies an L2. At any given point in the development of a learner's IL, some aspects of the IL grammar may be identical to L2 grammar, but other aspects will be different. The eventual result of instruction and years of practice of speaking an L2 will produce an IL we can call the *end-state grammar.*This is the grammar that the learners will use for communicating with native speakers of the L2 from that point on. It will not change much, and it probably will not be identical to the grammar of a native speaker, but it may be very close to it. Thus, according to this model, the process of learning English is the process by which a learner begins to develop an IL, and that IL continues to grow more and more similar to the English grammar of a native speaker until it stabilizes.

Speaker A: L1......IL1..................L2 (English)
Speaker B: L2..............IL2..........L2 (English)
Speaker C: L3.................IL3...L2 (English)

This diagramme illustrates the fact that ILs of different learners vary in their approximation to the grammar of the L2 that is being learned.

Some common errors made by Mugali Rai as EFL learners which were taken during my fieldwork in 2011 are as follows:

41. *It is/was looking good.
42. *I am/was hopping.
43. *I am/was understanding.
44.*I am/was resembling.
45. *I lived here since 2000.
46. *He have eaten rice.
47. *You was writing a letter.

Students' proficiency in English aspect can be developed in English through different activities. Mugali Rai as EFL learners cannot make distinction between activity verbs and stative verbs. Stative verbs cannot express progressive aspect. For present progressive, students are asked to describe the present situation of weather like *it's raining, the temperature is increasing*, etc. For the correct use of the auxiliary verb in present progressive, students can be categorised into two groups 'A' and 'B'. Under group 'A', students should be categorised into *'I, we, you, he, she, it, they'* groups. On the other hand, under 'B' group, students should be categorized into *'am, is, are'* groups. *'I'* subgroup from group 'A' matches *'am'* subgroup of group 'B'. In this case, when students from 'A' group say *'I'*, students from group 'B' say *'am'*. Similarly, *'we', 'you', 'they'* subgroups of group 'A' matches *'are'* subgroup of 'B'. When students from group 'A' say *'we', 'you'* and *'they'*, students from group 'B' say *'are'*. Similarly, *'he', 'she', 'it'* subgroups of group 'A' match the *'is'* subgroup of 'B'. When

students from group 'A' say *'he', 'she', 'it'*, students from group B say *'is'*. Then, they should be asked to drill until they remember these rules perfectly.

Similarly, the students are asked to perform interview such as, *Where was your father working? What were you doing when the bomb exploded?* This type of interview helps to use past progressive.

Similarly, students are asked to make distinction between sentences like *I have lived here since 2005. vs. *I lived here since 2005*. Why is the former sentence correct and not the latter one? In this way, students can be engaged in different activities such as dialogue, interview, role play, demonstration, etc. addressing the English aspects system.

Abbreviations

1 = first	PERF = perfect
A = agent	PROG = progressive
ERG = ergative	PST = past
NPST = non-past	S= subject
SG = singular	P = patient

References

Cowan, R. (2009). *The Teacher's Grammer of English: A Course Book and Reference Guide*. India: Cambride University Press.

Crystal, D. (2008). *A Dictinary of Linguistics and Phonetics*. The UK: Blackwell publishers.

Eppele, J., Lewis, M., Regmi, D., & Yadava, Y. (2012). *Ethnologue: Lanugages of Nepal*. Kathmandu: Linguistic survery of Nepal and Tribhuvan University.

Given, T. (2001). *Syntax: An Introduction.*Vol I.. Amsterdam: John Benjamins publishing company.

Givón, T. (2001). *Syntax: an introduction* (Vol. 1). John Benjamins Publishing.

James, C. (1980). *Contrastive Analysis*. Harlow: Longman.

Lado, R. (1957). *Linguistics Across Cultures*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan.

Payne, J. L., Hand, M., Barovich, K. M., & Wade, B. P. (2008). Temporal constraints on the timing of high-grade metamorphism in the northern Gawler Craton: implications for assembly of the Australian Proterozoic. *Australian Journal of Earth Sciences*, *55*(5), 623-640.

Rai, I. P. (2007). Personal Pronouns in English and Chhiⱡing: A Contrastive Study in *Journal of NELTA,* Vol. 12, No. 1-2, 102-107

Rai, I. P. (2011). *A Sketch Grammar of Mugali Rai*. A Report Submitted to NFDIN, Lalitpur.

Rai, I. P. (2012). English Tense and Aspect: EFL Problems that Chhulung Learners Have. *Journal of NELTA,* Vol. 17, No. 1-2, 61-69.

Rai, I. P. (2015). Mugali and English Tenses: EFL Problems and Pedagogical Strategies. *Nepalese Linguistics*, Vol. 30, 92-95.

Winter, W. (1991). *The Rai of Eastern Nepal: Ethnic and Linguistic Grouping. Finding of the Linguistics Survey of Nepal and CNAS*. Kathmandu: CNAS.

Yule, G. (1993). *The Study of Language*. Great Britain: Cambridge University Press.